

Maundy Thursday Sermon
Christ Church Vienna

09, April 2020

I recently had a virtual get together with some old college friends for the first time in quite a few years. Like many of you, we felt the need to connect, to reach out during this time of social distancing. During the course of our evening deep feelings began to emerge from our conversations.

One of my friends described for over 10 years he has been involved with a programme providing english language education to prisoners, many of whom I presume, will not soon or will perhaps never be released. He spoke of how these men have become an important part of his life, how their love and appreciation for learning, not for the sake of padding a CV or to get a good job. But merely for the experience of discovery, and an opening of the mind of engaging with literature and writing.

In this context for a brief moment each week, they are no longer prisoners they are students and he is their beloved and dedicated teacher. Because of the COVID-19 crises, he is no longer able to meet with these men. His description of his last meeting with these men was dramatic. When he had to tell them that it was very likely they would not meet again. The funding which makes this programme possible has been in jeopardy for some time and he is certain that it will not be continued further after this crisis.

He described to us the emotion of meeting, the sense impending loss in the room and he told us how the state of prisons and prisoners is not like we think, how many of his students are not young, but old, wearied through years of incarceration, saddled with health problems, many of these men have been incarcerated since the 70's and 80's. He said, when we picture prisons, we picture bad and dangerous people, but most of these men have served long sentences are now weak and unhealthy, old and tired, some of them would attend his classes with the assistance walkers. He said to us "No matter what happens, I know some of them will die from this. There is no social distancing or adequate health care. They will be victims of this virus, and no one will care." But he does care. and so should we.

I read the today's gospel in the light of my friend's story.

In our Gospel reading shows Jesus parting ways with his friends to be taken away as a prisoner. After having concluded his last meal with his friends, which we remember in the Eucharist, he now gathers his disciples to wash their feet, which normally we would remember as a ritual today.

The ceremonial remembrance washing of feet, that we normally practice, is to my mind always a bit disturbing for us it can seem an offensive and challenging call to ministry, that confronts all of us and our seeming place and status in world. There is no doubt that the disciples' feet following Jesus as he ministered and cared for the sick, the dying for the outcasts and those whose spirit was broken. At several times on that journey he did things to challenge their perceptions to make them uncomfortable. And now he asks them to expose their bare dirty feet, of all things!

I think from the reading we can infer a few things about the disciples' hesitation to have their feet washed:

One, is that Jesus would be willing to see and touch and wash something that for them was repulsive. Peter's words „*You will never wash my feet.*“ are rooted in the two fold embarrassment of having his teacher someone he looks up to put in the position of slave or servant to do a menial task. It is an embarrassment for him.

And secondly, to receive this act of care, then the same may be required of them. Verses 12-13, „*Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. 14 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 16 Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them*“

These verses and the liturgical act of footwashing, we would normally practice is unsettling, it is humbling, it can even seem embarrassing and for some this can seem too much to engage with. Exposing something that is hidden means we must become vulnerable, but even more to be called to care for others in the same way is also scary. This may mean going to „those“ places, to meet those „those“ people we would perhaps prefer not to associate with or even recognize.

I am encouraged to see people who are willing to take up this call and like my friend, and I am also aware that often they are not in the church. We should all thank God for the Holy Spirit which continues to instill loving and dedicated service in the hearts of people both within and the outside of church. We should all be grateful for them because we all benefit from their sacrifice.

During this Holy Week I am sure we all understand it more than ever as we find ourselves in the midst of what would have seemed just months ago the unbelievable situation we are in today. No doubt, COVID-19 will be a defining moment for our world, whether this crisis and economic impact lasts for weeks or for months or years.

I think it is telling that so many of our political leaders have resorted to language and imagery of war to mobilize the public. In my view this it is a shame that something more grounded in the language of healing, love and care, does seem sufficient. Perhaps our societies are not deemed ready for something rooted in what Jesus presents us with here, the imagery of sacrificial service rooted in love and care, is not yet enough to enliven hearts and summon a response from the public. Or perhaps it is just our political leaders are not yet ready.

In 2011 the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams reflected on the act of foot washing offering a different kind of imagination rooted in our faith and depicted in our Gospel reading today.

„the one big thing that Christianity had brought into the world of human imagination. And that was – and is – the truth that power constantly needs to be reminded of what it's for. Power exists, in the Church or the state or anywhere else, so that ordinary people may be treasured and looked after, especially those who don't have the

resources to look after themselves. The Bible is crystal clear that this is the standard by which the gospel of Jesus judges the powerful of this world. [1]

His words from almost 10 years ago resonate even more today. This imagination which is rooted in the vision of the Kingdom of God is a gift to humanity and it reveals that the mission of the church is not a retreat from the world with its problems and needs, it is rather a mission to go into the world in the power of the Spirit to the work of prophetic speech and action. Understood in this way the washing of feet is not meant for us alone, but like all that Jesus did, and all we are called to do in his name, it is done for the life of the world.

Christians must not retreat from this world, even and especially during these times of social distancing. Like the dirt on the feet of the disciples we must now be willing to have exposed what we are ashamed of in our own society and in our own lives, if cleansing is to be possible. We must be willing to confront our own failures and our complacency and collusion with sinful structures and damaging patterns of life and to expose them. Jesus wants to cleanse and to redeem and this requires our willingness to come forward and to receive his care and to accept his mission of care for this world.

I believe this means doing our part, by finding ways large and small to use our power to confront lies, greed and injustice that dominates our age and the demonic realities they have unleashed in the world. Such as, massive disparities in wealth, which leave a very few living in unimaginable luxurious splendor while others lack even the most basic access to bare necessities required for life. This is true not just in the global South, but also increasingly in the prosperous North, perhaps now with this crisis, we will pay more attention. We are also called to speak up against institutionalized dehumanization found in our prisons and in the denial of welcome which demonstrated in the unwillingness to find pathways to sanctuary, asylum and citizenship of 10 of millions of people throughout the world, which instead which is forcing men, women and children fleeing war or poverty (or both) to live in horrific conditions including the borders of European Union. And also let us not forget about the massive global arms trade that perpetuates all of these problems and creates an economy that literally is built upon the suffering and death of millions of people. I could go on, but I think you get the point.

These things are not pretty, they are not comfortable, but they are being exposed all around us. As Christians we simply cannot be lulled to sleep, contented with the frivolity of a culture of consumerism and constant entertainment, or even worse cloak ourselves in untruths, strange conspiracy theories which seems to celebrate the denial of reason and prudence even face overwhelming evidence. Such things turn ignorance into a virtue and encourage meanness among many in the public, while contributing to a lack of accountability and quality of our leaders.

Brothers and Sisters, I truly believe that Jesus is calling out to us in depths of this crisis. He is calling us all to *Metanoia*, it is a term an Greek which means a change of heart and conversion.

Our service today will end similarly to where my sermon began with the story of a prisoner. I encourage all of you to read and reflect on the verses of Matthew 26.31-58.

We should never forget that our Lord himself was taken as a prisoner, that he was willing to be handed over to those dark powers of this world, in the words of our lenten prose, an "*innocent, captive taken unresisting*."

Normally during this service we would strip the altar bare, solemnly removing every decoration and wiping down its surface with vinegar. Today as a result of this crisis perhaps we should consider that we have been stripped of the altar itself, it has been taken from us, for a time, and maybe we can let the bitterness of our separation reflect the bitterness of the vinegar which would normally be applied to the altar. As we proceed to Good Friday let pray that we would be awake and willing to abide with Christ through this time of trial remembering Jesus' love for his friends and for the whole of creation.

The Rev'd Mike Waltner

[1]Thought for the day BBC4 <http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/1740/thought-for-the-day-maundy-thursday-2011>